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ABSTRACT

Instruction in basic composition can be undertaken as a cooperative effort between student and teacher similar to the interrelationship of performer and audience. Cooperative instruction implies more than changing texts and using class time in new ways it implies that the instructor must show a greater sensitivity to attitude. Transactional analysis (TA) offers a way of understanding and practicing writing instruction in a cooperative mode. A major aim of TA is to change established patterns of communication into more positive expression. It affords a means to better understand how attitude affects communication and how communication affects the roles of the correspondents-students writing and instructors reading. Students who articulate that they hate English may be saying, "I'm OK, but writing is not OK," which the instructor can help by showing how writing may be a source of positive benefit. A more common and complicated attitude is "I am not OK and neither is my writing." This may require a teacher to present a positive alternative in which the student sees writing as a skill not a gift. The role of the teacher is to demonstrate positive attitudes toward students and their writing. Acceptance means reading through the student's eyes to avoid some of the damaging effects of unconscious attitudes brought to the reading. (TJ)

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Transactional Analysis in Basic Writing:

Going Behind Fear

Emory Maiden

Hope for the future is the primary thrust of my remarks, but a hope based on our ability to profit from legitimate criticism of how composition has been taught. I believe Janet Emig is correct when she concludes in The Composing Processes of 12th Graders that teaching writing has often been a neurotic activity: conditioning student writers to attend to niceties rather than to essentials. I agree with James Moffet in Teaching the Universe of Discourse when he suggests that writing curricula need to be fitted to students' needs, rather than to the convenience of school administrators. Although they work from different premises and use different methods, Emig and Moffet seem to agree that students and their writing need to be at the center of any writing curriculum; both suggest that the teacher has dominated stage center somewhat like a fading actor who jealously guards his time on stage protesting, "I work alone!" I am afraid that is an act that writing students have grown tired of: an act teacher-centered, teacher-directed, teacher-absorbed, and often teacher-indulgent.

If students and their writing come to center stage, then surely the instructor's role must be affected. Should the basic student write solioquies? Peter Elbow in Writing Without Teachers suggests that students' performances often improve without teacher intervention, but I don't consider what Elbow and his students are doing as basic writing. Basic students often do write for only themselves, but a model for basic writing would recognize that as a developmental phase and encourage an address to an audience including an instructor offering feedback. Thus, based on the best available advice, I

CS205117

suggest that instruction in basic composition be undertaken as a cooperative effort similar to the interrelationship of performer and audience.

If a better composition model depends on a cooperative effort between instructor and student, then what guideposts exist to point the way around obstacles to cooperation? Don Murray, Ken MaCrorie and others have talked about ways of practicing cooperative instruction. However, cooperative instruction implies more than changing texts and using classtime in new ways; within a successful cooperative model, the instructor must show a greater sensitivity to attitude. No matter how well planned a scheme of writing instruction may be, if either party--instructor or student--comes with negative attitudes toward the writing, then the chances of success diminish substantially. I want to suggest that what are presently implications about attitude should be reexamined as overt and fundamental concerns for any basic writing model. The comparison to cooperation between audience and performer is generally useful, but a source offering more precision about the collaborative nature of communication as well as the primacy of attitude in that collaboration is available. I wish you to consider the possibilities of Transactional Analysis as a way of understanding and practicing writing instruction in a cooperative mode. TA offers many interesting possibilities for discussion; for example, it might be useful to consider (in Eric Berne's Games People Play sense of the word) the games instructors and students play. It might be instructive and entertaining to understand the futility of playing "Now I've Got You, You SOB." However, because of limited time, I would like to examine three tenets of TA which shed light on a model for cooperative writing instruction and, then to show how such insight might be applied within that model.

Transactional analysis broadly stated is the description and interpretation of the strategies and meanings contained in seemingly off-hand communication. Examining the implicit mutual agreements between correspondents, agreements about subjects to be discussed and the tones to be used--is transactional analysis. Transaction, in this sense, seems to mean the collaborative effort necessary for day to day communications to go on. One of the major aims of TA is especially attractive to a basic writing instructor: to change established patterns of communication into more positive expression. TA assumes that we all seek attention and affection through communication no matter what kind of information we convey. Inherent in any communication, then, is a request for stroking which reaffirms a speaker or writer's sense of self. Many of the problems Moffet and Emig describe stem from the student writer's difficulty in seeing writing as self-affirming; the relationship between communication and stroking is valuable as a way to understand the kinds of writing and the subjects basic writing students choose. The belief that communication is self-affirming, a request for strokes, leads to a third premise that suggest that communication is shaped and severely limited by attitudes toward self and others; that is, performance in writing may be seen as directly related to the kind of self and the kind of audience perceived. Thomas Harris's popular work I'm OK, You're OK outlines two fundamental positions for self-image and attitude toward the world--OK or not OK. The concept of Okness, as applied to basic writing instruction, would encourage instructors and students to consider their attitudes toward writing done in a basic course.

Attitude is the key to all three metaphors that I have been discussing: transaction, stroking, OKness. Attitude, as it's being used here means a psychic condition between a purely emotional reflex and a carefully worked out

intellectual stance. Attitude has some of the qualities of an unexamined but important underlying assumption--unexamined because it stands behind a response but is not the response. Attitudes, then, may be seen as an unspoken background to meaningful writing. Attitudes are important to a cooperative writing model in a couple of ways: first, we need to understand and how to deal with our students' prevailing negativism toward writing; second, as students begin to write, the concern for attitude serves as a way to begin the pre-writing process by encouraging a broad range of composing choices. TA and some of its metaphors offer what a cooperative model for basic writing needs: a means to better understand how attitude affects communication and how communication affects the roles of the correspondents--students writing and instructors reading.

APPLICATION

The paragraph ended, "I just hate English!" and I wondered if the course hadn't also despite the fact that it was only the first meeting. I asked my students to write about how they felt and what they thought about being in a basic writing class. Even if it were likely that a student actually hated the language, believing that hate is an appropriate attitude signals grave difficulties for learning how to write the language effectively. Usually the English-hater turns out to be someone who enjoys talking, but doesn't relish reading or writing; thus, the communication often means "I'm OK, but writing is not OK." Most basic students who have such an attitude experience writing as a source of predominantly negative strokes of a couple sorts. The first stems from the inherent difficulty of the act; translating ideas into words on paper is no easy task, especially for a relative beginner. Why a basic student would feel frustrated is as obvious as the nature of the positive response offered--the gain is worth the pain. Whether panegyric or pragmatic, whether talking about the immortality of the written word or about marketable

skills, alternatives to negative attitudes must show how writing may be a source of positive benefit. Framing the alternatives is a matter of personal style answering a particular situation. Talking about the benefits of the writing discipline helps, but leads to a second source of negative attitudes: often the object of hate is writing as an academic subject, is composition as it has been taught. Students speak wearily of the note-card-Roman numeral outline--perfect copy kind of composing; others feel cheated by hurried and necessarily slap-dash 50 minute responses in impromptеau situations. As Janet Emig suggests, students have seen the writing as not being for them but for someone else. The alternative, of course, is a cooperative view of writing instruction: the student sharing or making decisions about paper length, subject matter, deadlines and organization. Finally, the English-hater should be offered positive alternatives to attitudes formed through frustration and a narrow, school-sponsored conception of what writing is. At a basic level, providing alternatives is a person to person appeal: put the past away; give me a fresh chance to show you that writing is OK and you will have a clean slate to make it so.

The English-hater is on one end of the spectrum and the following first day response represents a voice from the other end: "I know I can't write. I don't know enough grammar and my spelling is terrible (spelled with one r). My teachers have told me I can't write, so I'm not surprised about being in this class." The attitude here is more common and, almost certainly, more complicated to deal with: "I am not OK and neither is my writing." The important first step is to provide a positive alternative which suggests, "You are OK and you can make your writing OK." That may sound facile as a first response to what are often deeply felt pains and troubled experience; however, there a number of reasons why such a response is appropriate. First, many basic writing students have negative attitudes toward themselves and

toward their writing, but most are not emotionally troubled persons. As a group then, they are by definition OK, but perhaps badly used, persons. Second, students--and maybe all human beings according to TA--have a deeply-seated will to believe in their own OKness and, maybe more importantly, have an equally strong urge to become communicators of that OKness. Third, a practical way to break the vicious circle of low expectations leading to poor performance creating even lower expectation is to furnish different expectations: If you are OK, your writing can be too. The central thread in all three of these reasons is that I don't try to convince my students of their OKness, rather I assume it. I want them to concentrate on their writing and consider their attitudes toward it. If you take care of smaller questions about self-image, then often the larger questions take care of themselves. By assuming their OKness, I may be playing ostrich, hiding from compelling and weighty issues, but I prefer to think that I am helping to light one small candle. Even if that candle shines in a hole the size of an ostrich head, then it will be a bright little hole.

Treating basic writing students as OK persons (whether they believe they are or not) shows how metaphors borrowed from TA may be used and practically speaking, such treatment also neutralizes the prevailing negativism long enough for my students to begin talking about specific criticisms that led to the negative attitude toward their writing. One of Mina Shaughnessy's legacies is a demonstration of how common usage errors result from misinformation or misinterpretation. I would suggest that most of the students' negative attitudes toward their writing come about in a similar way: a knowledgeable but overworked teacher says something about writing that a student in a class of thirty misinterprets and that misunderstanding takes its place among others. One of the most common misconceptions,

implicit in the opening day response I read earlier, concerns the gift of writing ability. Many of my basic writing students believe that the ability to write is a gift from the gods and that they have not been blessed. They are taught and often feel the genius of Shakespeare, Twain and Faulkner and they receive instruction on their own writing failures; the resulting over-generalization from genius to workaday prose is a serious but common mis-conception. Where our students see talent, we should assert the importance of learned writing customs and skills. One useful demonstration of writing as a skill is to present statistics about the large number of persons earning a C or better in freshman composition. The statistics lead to questions about the nature of a special talent that is so wide-spread; similarly, statistics on the number of persons successfully completing the basic writing course further attests to some kinds of writing as a learned skill.

If some writing can be shown to be a skill and not a given talent, then most basic writers are ready to begin refining the grammar they didn't know they had and to begin learning about conventional spellings rather than right or wrong ones. Within the area of skills instruction the problems are individual and examples would not be that useful; however, two principles stand out. Almost all students respond positively to a descriptive approach that counters their former prescriptive instruction: the difference between conventional and right, taken for granted by us, is still a positive revelation to basic students because it puts the question into the arena of personal judgment rather than within the confines of an established and sacred code. Second, in all honesty, we must emphasize that no one can yet predict how much practice or how much time must be invested in refining skills and learning new prose customs, but that is a more manageable question than not having a talent. And maybe that is an important function of using TA to deal

with negative attitudes toward writing: to offer a positive alternative to or a rephrasing of a question that before had led to only a dead end.

Negative attitudes brought into the first meeting of basic writing courses, attitudes formed over a school career, have an especially damaging effect because most students are there not by their own choosing. Placement, though humanely administered, exacerbates negative attitudes already held. Although I have talked the most about how a focus on attitude through TA might affect the first meetings, I don't mean to suggest that concern should stop after a few sessions. A concern for attitude should follow through into the practical questions of skills instruction and into questions about the composing process, especially prewriting--the area in which most of our students have the least experience. Making attitude the subject of the first day's writing sets a tone which translates into prewriting questions about other attitudes which the student writer wants to communicate to an audience. TA offers hopeful insight into perceiving and handling negative attitudes that hamper our basic student's attempts to write--maybe they are basic students because they can't quiet those negative voices as effectively as their more glib contemporaries. I am also aware that the process of changing student attitudes is at once slow and difficult; any effort made now is up against powerful counter-forces which George Orwell, Marshall McLuhan, Edwin Newman and others guage for us; of course, if we don't begin fostering more positive attitudes toward writing, then the future isn't all that bright either.

I've been describing how TA might help in changing students' negative attitudes toward writing presupposing a cooperative instructional model, but I have also been describing a role for an instructor/advisor that implies a certain attitude--maybe something similar to the helping attitude Karen Spear

discusses in an article in the most recent number of College Composition and Communication. However, a model based on transactional premises would ask more from the instructor than a sensitivity to and concern for the students' attitudes toward writing: the instructor must make his own attitudes toward reading student writing a matter of considerable self-examination. Even if a predispoisition for empathy and concern is a part of the basic writing teacher's make-up, even if sensitivity and good will are to some extent self-selecting, I am nevertheless convinced that basic writing instruction provides enough frustation, disappointment and disillusionment to sour a saint. Thus, I wish to recommend an examination of attitude not just for the sinner about to enter the confessional, but for anyone reading basic student writing--I wish to recommend an awareness of attitudes coming into play and, more importantly, controlling when.

If one believes that students' attitudes toward writing may hamper written performances, then it is also reasonable to assume that writing teachers may have attitudes toward reading student writing that limit the instructor's effectiveness instead of trying to prove that premise, I would like to examine one widely held attitude expressed in the oft-heard statement, "Students don't have anything to say." What stands behind that remark is an attitude about something called college content--not content in the sense of developed statement, but in the sense of topic selection. A specific example comes from my department's attempt to work out a humane screening and placement process for this year's freshman class. While discussing the successes and failures of last summer's work a colleague began to talk about the difficulties of finding good writing topics and concentrated on one essay topic in particular, "The most important event in my life." My friend felt that the topic elicited a number of rather poor responses: two popular but unfortunate choices centered

on "the day I got my car" and "the day I got my stereo." As my colleague continued, it became clear that the primary objection wasn't to poor development of the idea or mechanical ineptness, but rather a judgment was made on the appropriateness of the subject to college discourse. One has only to look at Tom Wolfe's collection Kandy Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby to appreciate the impact both cars and music have had on ~~our~~ contemporary culture; Wolfe's essays also show the extent to which such a topic can produce keen cultural criticism. No, the source of the problem was not in the topic, but within my colleague's conception of what constitutes acceptable subject matter.

The point is not to attack my colleague who is a tireless worker, a careful reader and a sympathetic listener, nor to damn our fledgling placement scheme since three readers judged the best and the worst. Rather, I hope to suggest that my colleague has a widely shared prejudice that reflects some of the powerful sources of other crippling attitudes. For example, I am reasonably certain that the content prejudice originates in a strong allegiance to the English belle lettre tradition of Pater, Arnold, Addison and Steele, underwritten further by a long classical rhetorical tradition. Academic preparation, undergraduate and graduate alike, reinforces an attitude toward a certain level of decorum and field of discourse that surfaces in statements about content. Moreover, many of my colleague's peers have suffered the same education and espouse similar attitudes in coffee room chatter, gripe sessions and departmental meetings. They reflect the content prejudice in lists of potential topics; abashed students and lazy ones read those lists as approved topics and so it goes. Many writing programs institutionalize the content prejudice by creating a syllabus with a sequence of topics specified. Is it that our students don't have anything to say or is it that we just don't want to hear it? Thus, through academic preparation, peer contact and programmatic decisions,

the content prejudice and others like it are perpetuated--perpetuated, not out of malice or lack of concern, but out of strongly felt allegiances to laudable principles; and yet, such attitudes certainly limit the effectiveness of both the student's writing and the instructor's reading.

The difficulty is not in agreeing that writing teachers may have attitudinal blind spots; the difficulty is not in understanding the forces--often positive--that create those blind spots; the difficulty lies in knowing which attitudes are harmful when. The awareness that we humans suffer grave limitations in seeing, that we wear blinders is a humbling first step, but of little help by itself. Moreover, trying to see the blinders while trying to read a student's writing is productive of more confusion than clarity because reading and reacting to writing is challenging enough without reading and reacting to oneself reading and reacting. Thus, cultivating an awareness of unconscious attitudes puts the reader/instructor in a mental double bind somewhat similar to the Zen koan (gōun): how do you see to get the blinders off if you've got blinders on? A Zen answer might be, "I can't hear you, I've got a banana in my ear," but a more practical answer may be to use someone else's eyes for a few moments to get outside the limits imposed by unconscious attitude. As applied to reading student writing, I am suggesting that an unconditional acceptance of the student's writing, at least on the first reading or on one level, neutralizes the most harmful effects of reader attitudes. In the example already cited, my friend never really saw the possibilities of the students' perceptions of stereoes or cars because of intervening attitudes about college content. I am suggesting that a reader aware of the negative effects of unconscious attitudes should read a student's work allowing the writer to furnish the controlling assumptions and attitudes. I am recommending that the instructor reader, as an act of will, insure an

openness to communication of both attitudes and information--surely an important part of that openness is wanting, not only, to know what has been written but also to understand what has been communicated. The exigencies of much school-sponsored writing militate against that openness. However, if a model for basic writing is to be truly cooperative in the future, then just as the instructor offers positive alternatives to the student writer for negative attitudes, so it is that reader/instructors must acknowledge the limits of their vision and accept the possibilities for seeing offered in student writing.

Acceptance here does not mean that the basic writing instructor assumes student writing is OK or reads it as if it were. Acceptance means reading through the student's eyes first in order to avoid some of the damaging effects of unconscious attitudes brought to the reading. Accepting the limitations of the student's writing and of its implicit context would seem to squander much of what a trained reader has to offer: wider experience, greater knwoledge and more informed taste. However, the act of accepting the text and the resulting context, in some ways similar to the old New Critics approach to a literary text, requires a reaction framed with considerable skill and judgment. Each piece of writing would be seen as one in a series of one emerging from and fulfilling its own expectations and needs. Such a reading would allow the quality of an individual piece to indicate the kind of advice to be given: for example, a writer troubled by a lack of sentence continuity as reflected in fragments gains little from being fragged in the margin if the cause is ambivalent or conflicting attitudes toward a subject. Acceptance does not waste what the trained professional has to offer; rather, the reader/instructor must make fine judgments about which advice to offer when and how.

In conclusion, I have been trying to answer some questions about the changes that a cooperative model for basic writing might necessitate, changes affecting both student and instructor. I have suggested that TA provides some insight into a critical area if fully cooperative instruction is to be a reality--the area of students' negative attitudes toward writing as an act and as a result of their own lack of skills. TA contains several metaphors--OKness, strokes, transaction--which show how the instructor might become an advisor about attitude, someone to offer positive alternatives to negative presets. I have also used the idea of transaction--exchanges of communication--in a larger sense to clarify the instructor's role as reader, to open up important concerns about the instructor's attitudes toward reading student writing. If a model for basic writing is to be truly cooperative, the instructor must be sensitive to the negative effects of both student and instructor attitudes. If TA offers anything to an understanding of new roles, it is that an open dialogue with the students must be established to help them around negative attitudes affecting their writing and to help instructors understand similarly negative attitudes toward student writing.

Finally, I think the cooperative model influenced by the metaphors of TA has a number of advantages for both students and instructors. One of the strongest imperatives of a cooperative model is to return some control of school-sponsored writing to the students. The freedom of topic selection and the implied acceptance of student text as context underwrite and encourage the development of better attitudes toward writing. The result of more positive attitudes may be that our students will begin to write with serious commitment and even delight. The explicit discussion of attitude is helpful in emphasizing the nature and importance of pre-writing, and in expanding the students' narrow conception of what writing can be. Talking about attitude

and its relationship to writing encourages the whole-brained, whole person response that most instructors applaud as the emergence of a personal voice, and appreciate as an attempt to say something in a required class. Surely, both students and instructors would benefit from a cooperative model that would keep our courses, and perhaps our interest in those courses, forever young: our students' and our teaching strategies would always be changing together. The shared flow of energy and attention inherent in a cooperative model would put our students' writing in a soft but thrilling spotlight; the student and the teacher would be introduced to the pleasures and terrors of performing together. In a song called "Stage Fright," Robbie Robertson talks about taking risks for an audience and taking risks for yourself and he talks about the resulting flow of energy and excitement:

> "See the man with the stage fright,
> Just standing up there giving all his might.
> He got caught in the spotlight,
> But when he gets to the end
>
> He wants to start all over again."